

Book Review

By Jim Witteveen

W. Robert Godfrey, God's Pattern for Creation: A Covenantal Reading of Genesis 1, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003. Paperback, 136 pages, \$4.40 USD (from the publisher).

In this brief popular work, Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, professor of church history and president of Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California, puts forth the case for what he calls a 'covenantal' reading of Genesis 1. According to Godfrey, the days of creation as described in Genesis 1 "are not a timetable of God's actions but are a model timetable for us to follow" (p.90). While "the days and week of Genesis 1 are presented to us as a real week of twenty-four hour days," "these days and week... do not describe God's actions in themselves but present God's creative purpose in a way that is a model for us" (p.85).

What is a "covenantal" reading of Genesis 1? Here are a few citations that will give some idea of Godfrey's thesis:

"Genesis is not a world history text... it is a covenant history focusing on what the people of God need to know about their God and about themselves" (p.20).

"Genesis is not written as a history book for uninformed, worldwide readers, but is part of the covenant history written for a covenant people who already know their God" (p.22).

"The revelation of God as the all-powerful creator is not just information for the world. It is a message to the covenant people about the character of their God." (p.23).

"Genesis 1 is not an encyclopedia of history or science but a covenant revelation of the character of the creation that God made for man..." (p.31-32).

Clearly, given the repeated "not this... but that" rhetorical device used by Godfrey, his assertion that Genesis 1 is "covenantal" in character is meant to counter an opposing view of the creation account. To Reformed Christians, this kind of "covenantal language" has its appeal; we love the covenant, and we love covenant theology, because we see in the covenants of Scripture the structure and beauty of God's relationship with His people, and indeed with all of creation. But I question Godfrey's assertions in all of these statements, because they create a conflict where one does not necessarily exist!

This "not this... but that" language creates the impression that the two parts of the statement are mutually exclusive. If Genesis 1 is "covenantal" in its character, does that *necessarily* mean that it is not a history of the world? Of course, Godfrey does use the phrases "world history text" and "encyclopedia of history or science," appearing to assert that those who argue for the "six consecutive real days that actually happened in history" view actually consider the opening chapters of the Bible to be a scientific treatise of some sort. This kind of language is not at all helpful, and it mischaracterizes those who believe that God created all things in the span of six actual historical days.

Here's an example of this kind of thinking in practice. Suppose for a moment that two men come across a field of barley for the very first time. One man looks at the barley and says, "Clearly this crop is meant only to form the basis for a beverage. I will harvest it, mash it, ferment it, and make beer."

The other man looks at the barley and says, 'Clearly this crop is meant only to form the basis for bread. I will harvest it, grind it, and use the end product to make bread.'

Both men refuse to acknowledge the truth of the other's discovery. So, the one man makes nothing but beer, and the other man makes nothing but bread. Both die, one from cirrhosis of the liver, the other from dehydration. Why do they die? Because they both failed to realize that they were not dealing with an "either-or" equation, but a "both-and." Barley has multiple uses; therefore, one use does not exclude the other. In creating a false dichotomy between two applications of the text, Godfrey misses out on a very important aspect of the message of the six days of creation.

But, speaking of "six actual historical days," this is where things get really muddy. Godfrey claims that the days of creation "are actual for us, but figurative for God" (p.90). In response to a statement like this, I can only say that my mind is unable to wrap itself around such a concept. I'm not exactly sure how a day can be actual for God's creatures, but figurative for their Creator, or how we can determine from the text that this is so. Perhaps there's a metaphysical concept here that I'm not grasping, but if not, this statement appears to be ultimately meaningless.

Furthermore, Godfrey also asks the question, "Does this conclusion mean... that the week of creation is not a literal description of the work of God?... This covenantal interpretation is a literal interpretation for it has sought to follow Moses in his own terms. It is also historical in its approach as it affirms that God created in time and by his sovereign power everything described in Genesis 1" (p.85).

So, while Godfrey does not accept that Genesis 1 presents a real chronology of the events of creation, he at the same time wishes to assert that *his* position is a literal interpretation, historical in its approach. Given the fact that, according to Godfrey, "we must conclude that the days of creation in Genesis 1 are not simple chronology" (p.44), I find it difficult to harmonize Godfrey's actual view with his claims.

Finally, Godfrey also claims to be following in the footsteps of John Calvin in his hermeneutic. Calvin, in his commentary on Genesis, noted that Moses was not always concerned with strict chronology in his writing. Writes Godfrey, "While Calvin does not apply this principle to Genesis 1, we are following his methods of interpretation in reaching such a conclusion" (p.46). However, I question whether Godfrey is actually following in Calvin's footsteps in his work. When Calvin spoke about God's "accommodation" in Genesis 1, he said that God accommodated His *work* to human capacity. Godfrey lists seven principles of interpretation that he derives from Calvin's study of Genesis 1. The second principle listed by Godfrey is this:

"Recognize that in the text God is accommodating himself to our capacity" (p.105).

There is a vital difference between Calvin's principles as actually worked out by Calvin himself, and Calvin's principles as interpreted by Godfrey. It is not *in the text* that God is accommodating himself, according to Calvin; it is in his very *work*. There is no distinction made by Calvin between God's actual work and the recording of that work in Scripture.

In 1 Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul says something very important about the relationship between the “text” of Scripture and the “history” recorded in Scripture. We need to keep this connection between God's work in history and the message of the words of Scripture in mind, so we can rightly understand the importance of the events recorded in Scripture. Paul is speaking in this passage about the events of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings, and the importance of these events for his readers:

“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:6-11, ESV).

Note carefully the words Paul uses in this passage. “*These things occurred.*” “*These things happened.*” These were actual events in history, and that is important. To say that they were recorded in Scripture to make a theological point, a theological point that should have a great impact on all of God's people, is absolutely true. They were “written down for our instruction.” But not only were these stories written down as warnings, “these things *happened to them* as an example”! There is no dichotomy here between theology and history; the two are so tightly linked that they cannot be torn apart. It's not “either-or.” It's “both-and”!

Did God use a recognizable pattern in his work of creation? Yes, he did, and that pattern was meant to teach us many very important things. But to say that his work is recorded in a pattern that is meant to teach, and that the creation account is “covenantal,” is not to deny the fact that what is recorded is a true and accurate account of actual events. Our God is the God of history, not merely the God of ideas. Here is the fatal flaw in Godfrey's examination of Genesis 1.